Ezekiel studies: present state and future outlook

Krüger, Thomas

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In a recent paper, titled "Synchrone und diachrone Texterschliessung im Ezechielbuch," Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann presents a comparison between a synchronic holistic interpretation of the oracles against foreign nations in Ezekiel and a diachronic redaction historical explanation.[1] This comparison leads him to the conclusion that a holistic reading of Ezekiel produces only general, broad-stroke, and superficial theological statements, whereas a redaction historical analysis shows how the texts grew out of successive processes of theological reflection and thus represent a cross-section of the colorful exilic and post-exilic history of theology and the struggle for new theological answers during that period.

I agree with Pohlmann in terms of his description of the present state of research. But I think that there is a potential for future development in different directions that are not mutually exclusive.

(1) I think that synchronic readings or, as I would prefer to say, readings that are not primarily focused on text-genetic questions, often are, but do not have to be, holistic, harmonizing, and superficial. Such readings can (and should) *also* be aware and appreciative of fractures, tensions and contradictions in the texts of Ezekiel and in the book as a whole.

(2) I think it is true that redaction-historical analyses and reconstructions usually help us to understand – and sometimes even bring to our attention – the variety of theological conceptions in the texts that point to the processes of theological reflection and discussion that lie behind the texts and gave them their present shape. However, this approach also has a tendency to historicize the theological discussions and to avoid an examination of them, in

[1] Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, "Synchrone und diachrone Texterschließung im Ezechielbuch," *HeBAI* 1 (2012): 246–70.

which the modern reader becomes involved in the debates of the texts and in turn involves the texts in present theological discussions.

(3) The redaction-critical analysis of Ezekiel has shown that we should most probably not trust the suggestion of the book that it is some kind of record of what God said to the prophet Ezekiel. I think this is true, but I wonder if we should not *imagine* a sort of 'prophetic' text production and transmission even for the editors and redactors of prophetic texts.

Let me elaborate on these three points.

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1. Reading and Interpreting the Fractures of the Book of Ezekiel

Synchronic readings often are, but do not have to be, boring. As an example, I cite Georg Fischer's comments on Ezekiel in his recent book, *Theologien des Alten Testaments*.[2] Fischer points to tensions and contrasts in conceptions of God in Ezekiel. Occasionally they are so severe, he writes, "that one could sometimes assume God's actions are almost self-contradictory." "In Ezekiel we find statements about God that are difficult to understand and contradict familiar concepts." "Even the opening vision, in chap. 1, has strange and exotic features. In the progression of the book they appear even more."

I quote Fischer as an example that shows that not all synchronic readings of Ezekiel are simply holistic and harmonizing. He also reminds us that fractures, tensions and contradictions are not always the products of a redaction-critical exegesis but rather their cause: phenomena that impose themselves on a reader who simply tries to read through the text and make sense of it. Let me briefly call to mind three major sets of fractures, tensions and contradictions challenging every reader of Ezekiel.

1.1 The Transcendence and Immanence of God

In chap 1, Ezekiel sees the glory of Yhwh, enthroned above the firmament, which is carried by the four winds, appearing to him in a whirlwind coming out of the north. The vision is located

[2] Georg Fischer, *Theologien des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2012), 96–101.

on earth, by the river Chebar, but what Ezekiel sees appears to be in heaven, as the introduction indicates: “the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God” (Ezek 1.1). To make things even more complicated, Ezekiel stresses that his description of the vision is, at most, only approximately true: “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yhwh” (1.28). This concept of God is highly sophisticated, but one may ask whether it is coherent at all.

Beyond chap 1, Ezekiel’s descriptions of God sound much more naive and less sophisticated. In chaps 8–11 Yhwh appears to depart from his cherub throne in the temple in Jerusalem, transfer to the mobile cherub throne of chap 1 and leave Jerusalem via the east gate. In chap 43 Yhwh enters his new temple, returning in the reverse direction. At the end of the book, Yhwh is (again) in the temple, which is now located outside the city, and perhaps also in the city (depending on the understanding of יהוה שמה in Ezek 48.35). Can God no longer appear in other parts of the world? And does he no longer sit enthroned above the heavens? Or should we understand all these later assertions about God in the light of chap 1 as ultimately inadequate approximations to an elusive reality? Or

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are these fractures, tensions and contradictions in Ezekiel witnesses to a religio-historical development leading from a conception of God as dwelling in the temple of Jerusalem, through the insight that God can be everywhere and transcend the world, and finally back to the idea that God resides in a temple, in contrast to, by way of example, Isaiah 66?[3]

[3] This inconsistency regarding God’s transcendence or immanence (to use these philosophical terms a bit imprecisely) is not peculiar to the Book of Ezekiel. It can be found also, for example, in 1 Kings 8 (v. 12: Yhwh dwells in a dark cloud; v. 13: Yhwh dwells in the Solomonic temple; v. 27: God does not dwell on earth, in heaven, or in a temple; v. 30: Yhwh dwells in heaven; etc.), or in Exodus 25–31 (25.8: Yhwh dwells in the sanctuary; 25.22: Yhwh meets with Moses in the sanctuary; etc.), and is in fact widespread in the ancient Near East, if not characteristic of the ancient Near Eastern understanding of god(s), cf. John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 97–99. 123–29. Accordingly, this inconsistency need not be indicative of multiple authorship, because ancient authors and editors conceivably did not realize it. Nevertheless, it *is* an inconsistency from the viewpoint of present-day exegetes, and can be explained by the historical development of religious ideas (successive expansion of the sphere of action of deities; increasing distance of deities from everyday life; new insights do not replace older traditions but complement them; etc.). Thus, inconsistency alone is not a sufficient reason for redaction critical (diachronic) conjectures (but an important indication!). However, that does not mean that it should be ignored or explained away in a holistic reading. Rather, inconsistencies should be worked out and

1.2 Collective and Individual Punishment

In chaps 1–24 Ezekiel announces a catastrophe that will strike Jerusalem and the Israelites who remained in Canaan after 597 BCE. This catastrophe is understood as God's punishment of Jerusalem's or Israel's crimes, which include their cults devoted to gods and goddesses besides Yhwh. It appears to be essential for most of the texts that this punishment is just. The criterion for just punishment is the correspondence between crime and punishment. Yhwh will judge Jerusalem or Israel "according to their ways." This should hold true for Jerusalem or Israel as a whole as well as for every single Jerusalemite or Israelite.

However, this can be true if and only if every single Jerusalemite and Israelite deserves the announced punishment. There are texts that allege such a claim, such as chap 22.[4] As a final consequence, this implies that every victim of a crime is at the same time a criminal. But then one may ask why criminals committing crimes against each other need to be punished at all. However, if there are victims who are not criminals, can it be called just punishment if the tormented falls victim to the punishment of his or her tormentor?

Ezekiel 9 announces that "the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within" Jerusalem will not be killed in the catastrophe – as distinct

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from "old and young men, maidens and little children and women" who will be slain pitilessly (9.5–6). According to Ezekiel 33, Yhwh, before he collectively punishes a land, gives every single inhabitant a chance to mend her or his ways and consequently be spared from punishment.

However, these hopes are obviously unrealistic. As Ezekiel 12.16 says, there will be guilty Israelites who survive the catastrophe, only to "declare all their abominations among the Gentiles wherever they go" and thus prove that Yhwh's punishment has been just. At the same

appreciated as leverage points for an ideological-critical assessment of the texts, which is vital for their theological interpretation.

[4] The problem does not come to the fore when Israel (and Judah) or Jerusalem (and Samaria) are conceptualized as single persons, such as in Ezekiel 16 and 23.

time, according to Ezekiel 21.8–10 (ET 21.3–5), there will be innocent victims of Yhwh's punishment in the land of Israel, where he "will cut off both righteous and wicked."

Together these statements illustrate mutually exclusive approaches to the problem of collective and individual punishment in Ezekiel.[5] The only solution to the problem that is posed by these contradictions is that even God is not able to solve it. Or is he?

1.3 Retributive and Creative Justice

A small but significant number of texts in Ezekiel say that Yhwh will not act with the Israelites according to their ways and actions. In the future God will give up his unsuccessful and impossible striving for retributive justice. Instead he will practice what can be called creative justice, i. e. he will cease punishing criminals and begin making them righteous. This will be accomplished by different means, mainly by giving them a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 6 [?]; 11; 36) and by making them feel ashamed because of their undeserved good fortune (Ezek 20; 36) – where the first may be achieved by the second.

In view of these texts, it becomes even more difficult to understand why Yhwh did not give up his striving for retributive justice much earlier, in favor of this practice of creative justice – particularly if he never had "any pleasure at all that the wicked should die," but rather "that he should turn from his ways and live," as Yhwh says in chap 18 (v. 32 *bis*). Was it because he still hoped that the Israelites would be able to "get [themselves] a new heart and a new spirit" as he calls on them to do in that same chapter (18.31)?

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Be that as it may, there are obviously not only tensions but also significant contradictions between the different views of God's punishment and justice in Ezekiel, which at least in my

[5] These approaches may trace back to one author or to different successive authors or editors. Taken together in a holistic view of the Book of Ezekiel as a whole, these approaches suggest (a) that it is not possible to govern the world in a way that does justice to every single human being; (b) that there are different ways to come close to that ideal; and (c) that the same reality can be viewed differently (as just or as unjust), depending on which of these different ways one prefers, so that (d) it is difficult, if not impossible, to tell whether there is a just world order and a just deity who is responsible for it. Presumably, none of these conclusions was intended by the author (or one of the authors or editors) of the Book of Ezekiel, or even noticed by them. Nevertheless, their work has prompted such theological insights, at least for modern readers.

understanding cannot be harmonized or synthesized into a holistic interpretation of the book.[6]

1.4 Different Future Outlooks

Even a superficial reading of the Book of Ezekiel shows that it contains oracles of doom as well as predictions of prosperity. According to the arrangement of the book, in which chapter 33, where Ezekiel receives the message of the fall of Jerusalem, marks a turning point, Ezekiel prophesied doom *and* prosperity before and after that catastrophe. However, only among his oracles from the time before the fall of Jerusalem (Ezek 1–24) one finds predictions of a total and final destruction of Jerusalem and Israel (e. g., chaps 4–7,[7] 12, 15, 19, 21, 22, and 24).[8] Before and after chapter 33, there are oracles of destruction and subsequent restoration (e. g., chapters 16, 17, 23, and 34).

Restoration is in some instances connected with the homeland (e. g., 36.1–15), in others with the exiles in Babylonia (e. g., 11.14–21, 37.1–15) or with the worldwide diaspora (e. g., chap. 20, 36.16–38, 37.15–28). In some texts the repentance of Israel appears to be a precondition (or a starting point) of restoration (e. g., chap. 3, 18, and 33), whereas others expect that Yhwh will transform (or resurrect) the Israelites in the course of restoration and thus change their

[6] Again, the different perspectives can be attributed to an intellectual development of one author or to an ongoing process of reflection by subsequent authors or editors. However, in this case it appears materially impossible to retain the older model of divine retribution after the concept of a creative justice of God is developed. Once one has realized this possibility of divine action, one can hardly continue to imagine a deity that kills the guilty instead of making them righteous. Thus, what appeared to fit together in the eyes of the ancient authors and editors does not always fit together from the viewpoint of modern exegetes (cf. 1.1 above).

[7] Ezekiel 6.8–10 speaks about survivors, who understand their own responsibility for the catastrophe, but does not envision a positive future for Israel connected with these survivors.

[8] It is reasonable to guess that these texts belong to the older material in the Book of Ezekiel dating from a time when the prophet (or his followers) still did not expect any future for Israel. This would go well together with the greater part of the oracles against the foreign nations in Ezekiel 25–32, where Yhwh seems to be no longer concerned with Israel, but with the international world order, with Babylon at the top. Apparently, the expectation of a restoration developed only when it became clear that Jerusalem and the Israelite community in the homeland was not destroyed, but continued to operate under the leadership of the Babylonian vassal Gedaliah. The placement of restoration oracles among Ezekiel's preaching before the catastrophe in chapters 1–24 apparently intends to show that Ezekiel did *not* erroneously promote the end of Israel, which he obviously did.

behavior (e. g., 11.14–21, 20.39–44, 36.16–38), or that he will exclude wrongdoers from Israel before making it prosper again (e. g., 20.33–38, 13.9).

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Again, it is not possible to fit the different and divergent expectations of Israel's future in the Book of Ezekiel into a kind of master plan. Viewed as a whole, the book appears to communicate that Ezekiel (or / and Yhwh) had no clear and distinct knowledge of what would happen in the future.

2. Redaction Criticism and Beyond

Fractures, tensions and contradictions like the ones briefly mentioned above hint at a redaction-critical reconstruction of the literary genesis and history of the Book of Ezekiel.[9] To say it in no uncertain manner: the evidence from different manuscripts and versions, and from documented cases in ancient Near Eastern and ancient Hebrew texts, makes clear that we must expect the Book of Ezekiel's literary development through multiple stages over a considerable period of time. According to our present understanding, this is the default hypothesis. The burden of proof is on the side of those claiming literary unity. In view of the differences between different editions of Ezekiel that are documented by Hebrew, Greek and Latin manuscripts, it is patently impossible to take the Masoretic Book of Ezekiel as a source for the sixth century BCE without any source-critical analysis (in the sense of a critical examination of the worth of Ezekiel as a historical source).[10]

[9] However, as already noted, they do not provide sufficient evidence for editorial work. Even if there is additional evidence like peculiarities of language and / o r style, historical or intertextual allusions, and / or the place of a text in the history of traditions, redaction-critical reconstructions are never more than an educated guess. The popular procedure to cut out and clear away from a given text what appears to disrupt a smooth and coherent flow of reading to get an older stratum of the text (which can again be analyzed in the same way) is probably too simple in view of the complexities of editorial work in the ancient Near East. See David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13–149.

[10] See Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, *Ezechiel* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008), 127–30. The numerous differences between MT and the usually shorter LXX version, conveniently presented in the translations of Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, *Der Prophet Hesekiel / Ezechiel 1–19*, ATD 22/1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996) and *Der Prophet Hesekiel / Ezechiel 20–48*, ATD 22/2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), can be explained largely and most easily as expansions of an older Hebrew *Vorlage* of LXX in the MT tradition. On source criticism as a historical method, see

However, redaction criticism is not the only way to explain and understand the fractures, tensions, and contradictions in Ezekiel and in other biblical texts. Such fractures, tensions, and contradictions can also result from the complexity and inconsistency of a single author's mind or from the complexity and inconsistency of communication and the broader context of discussions to which the text contributes. One author may simultaneously have different and only partially compatible communicative intentions. He or she may simultaneously

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orient him- or herself toward or be unconsciously influenced by different and incongruous traditions. And his or her experiences of reality (or reality itself) may not be free of tensions and contradictions.

If this is true, it could be helpful to distinguish between the 'real' or 'historical' author and a plurality of virtual or implied authors who can be discerned in their texts, the more so if the real author wrote the book over a period of twenty years, as the Book of Ezekiel suggests.[11] Of course, the same distinction between 'real' or 'historical' and 'virtual' or 'implied' author(s) must be made for every redactional layer of the book.[12]

If our understanding of redactors or editors of biblical texts is basically correct (as I think it is), these people must have had a kind of 'split (authorial) personality'. For they wanted to say something that had not already been said, or at least that had not already been said clearly enough, in the texts they edited, otherwise there would have been no need for them to make additions. At the same time, they preserved the parts of the texts that they viewed as wrong or at least insufficient.[13] So they produced texts with fractures, tensions, and contradictions,

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Martha C. Howell & Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[11] Even more so if the Book of Ezekiel has been produced over a period of hundreds of years, as it seems probable from a redaction-critical point of view.

[12] Cf. Wolf Schmid, "Implied Author," in Peter Hühn *et al*. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press), paragraphs 1–39. Published online by the Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology, University of Hamburg (Germany): http://wikis.sub. uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Implied_Author (accessed April 6, 2014).

[13] In fact, this mentality, which is difficult to understand for members of modern 'Western' cultures, appears to have been common in the tradition-oriented cultures of the ancient Near East, which on the one hand valued their traditions more than the present experiences of one person alone (cf. Bildad's reply in Job 8.8–10 to Job's insistence on his experience in Job 6.2–7), but on the other hand continually updated their traditions in view of new experiences.

the meanings of which are not simply identical with the intentions of the editors or redactors. The more complex these texts became as they grew, the greater the differences between the intentions of the people who were responsible for the present shape of the texts and the meanings of these texts became.

Thus, if it is the task of biblical exegesis to clarify the meaning(s) of biblical texts, this task is not accomplished when the genesis and literary development of the texts is critically reconstructed and described. When this redaction-critical work is done – and again, I think it has to be done – there remain the tasks of describing and exploring the potential meaning(s) contained in the texts, which may be the potential to think further, beyond what is already thought of in the texts, and perhaps also to criticize what is thought of in the texts by way of rethinking it.

So, for example, I think we can learn from Ezekiel that the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and Judah in the years 597 and 587 BCE should rather *not*

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be interpreted as God's punishment for the crimes of the Judahites and Jerusalemites as Ezekiel suggests. Even if all authors, redactors and editors of the book held this view, their reflections on Yhwh's collective and individual retributive justice show that even God would not be able to realize such justice. Rather than asking why God brought disaster on them, people should instead ask whether their ways and actions are right and how they can improve them.

Or, to mention just one other example, after having imagined God as transcendent, immanent and inconceivable, as Ezekiel 1 describes him (her?), it appears difficult to imagine that Yhwh desires to live in a temple (chap. 43) and in or next to a city (chap. 48) or that he is not able to communicate directly with people outside of Israel (which is an implicit presupposition of the argument in chaps. 20 and 36). Here again the Book of Ezekiel points beyond itself, and that should be noticed by an interpretation that does not confine itself to a reconstruction of the authorial intention(s) behind a literary work.

I hope that these two examples show how a synchronic exegesis of Ezekiel that does not ignore or downplay its fractures, tensions, and contradictions, but rather appreciates them as a challenge for theological reflection on and rethinking of this text, could be an interesting and

theologically promising supplement to a redaction-critical interpretation – but not a substitute for it.

3. Prophetic Editors

Such a synchronic view of the fractures, tensions, and contradictions in Ezekiel could then perhaps also contribute to a refinement and clarification of a redaction-critical interpretation. As Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann wrote in the article cited at the beginning of this chapter, redaction criticism interprets texts as products of successive processes of theological reflection. Accordingly, differences, tensions, and inconsistencies on a conceptual level are the primary hints of literary growth. As already noted above, this picture of conceptually consistent authors (including editors and redactors) may be a bit unrealistic. Furthermore, this picture does not conform to the picture of authorship that the book of Ezekiel itself presents.

Of course this is not compelling evidence, since the picture of authorship that Ezekiel presents may simply be wrong. Yet it may be worthwhile to consider for a moment what kind of authorial activity the Book of Ezekiel presents to its readers. According to the book, Ezekiel can be viewed as the book's author only insofar as the book documents what Yhwh has disclosed to the prophet on several occasions. The book is not simply the word of God, but rather documents the word of God as Ezekiel understood it, which was probably not without its own problems if one imagines that the voice of God was "like the noise of many

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waters" or "the noise of an army" (Ezek 1.24). This implies that Ezekiel is not responsible for the contents of the texts he wrote. Thus, he is also not responsible for their conceptual consistency. If Yhwh said "a" on one day and "b" on another day (cf. Ezek 29.17–21), this may be a challenge for further reflection, but the prophet is responsible not for finding a solution to this problem but for passing on what he heard from God as accurately as possible.

As I said, this picture of prophetic authorship may be fictitious. Nevertheless, it may reflect the self-understanding of the 'real' authors (including editors and redactors) of Ezekiel. In fact, the Book of Ezekiel does not claim that it was written completely by the prophet Ezekiel. It only claims that it contains what God said to Ezekiel, written by whomever. In the past decades we have learned from Susan Niditch, David Carr, and others that the authors and revisers of

biblical texts probably worked not with written texts on their desks but with memorized texts and traditions in their hearts.[14] I would like to propose combining this insight with the conjecture of Helmut Utzschneider, Odil Hannes Steck, and others that the editors of the prophetic books understood themselves not so much as scribes but rather as prophets.[15]

If that is true, it might well be that their literary products are less the result of conscious discussions and reflections than of unconscious processes in their hearts (or brains) for which they did not feel responsible themselves but which led them to insights that came to them like a word or a thought communicated to them by another person or by God.

In making this proposal I do not wish to re-mystify the production of the prophetic books. If it is true, it remains a paramount task of exegesis to reconstruct the discussions and reflections that found expression in the texts of the editors, albeit by way of their subconscious. At the same time, it would make it easier to understand why the editors and redactors could produce complex texts with apparent fractures, tensions and contradictions and not feel obliged to harmonize the texts (or perhaps they even felt unauthorized to do so). Thus, they preserved and regenerated the texts as a challenge to continuing theological reflection, a challenge that should be accepted and appreciated by contemporary readers and not explained away by holistic readings.[16]

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[15] Helmut Utzschneider, *Künder oder Schreiber* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989); Odil Hannes Steck, "Prophetische Prophetenauslegung," idem, *Die Prophetenbücher und ihr theologisches Zeugnis* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1996), 125–204, ET *The Prophetic Books and Their Theological Witness* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000).

[16] I would like to thank Sarah Sheetman and William Tooman for improving my English.

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